

A Biography of the Reverend Joseph Kidder of Dunstable, Massachusetts (now Nashua, New Hampshire)

By Clark Owen Kidder

Joseph Kidder was born November 18, 1741 in Billerica, Middlesex County, Massachusetts. He was the youngest son of Captain Enoch and Sarah (Hunt) Kidder, and was the ninth of ten children born to his parents. His father was 43 at the time of his birth, and his mother, 38. As was typical of the time, he was named after a son by the same name having died in infancy on August 14, 1738.^{1, 2, 3, 7}

Joseph received his first degree at Yale in 1764, and his second [Masters Degree], at Harvard, in 1767, when he held the affirmative of “An boni moralis et mali cognition, uodcumque sit necessarium ad agentem morale constituendum, implicet?”¹¹ He was called to what was then Dunstable, New Hampshire, on September 12, 1766, and was ordained there on March 18, 1767. Ebenezer Bridge participated:

“I began with prayer – Rev. Mr. Cumings preached from Romans 10.13-17. Next the Rev. Mr. Merrill gave the Charge – Rev. Mr. Wilkins prayed after the Charge and Rev. Mr. Spaulding gave right hand of fellowship.”^{2, 5, 9}



Reverend Mr. Cumings. Courtesy of the Billerica Historical Society.

On September 22, 1767, Joseph married Mary, widow of Nathaniel Badger of Dunstable, and daughter of Samuel and Ruth (Phillips) White of Haverhill, Massachusetts.^{1, 7} He and Mary had five children – Joseph, born May 11, 1769; Nathaniel, born March 19, 1771; Elizabeth, born Feb. 19, 1775; Sarah, born Mar. 17, 1777, and Ruth, born March 16, 1779.^{1, 2}

Soon after his marriage, he appeared at the next Harvard Commencement bringing his Yale diploma and “desiring to be admitted ad eundem” there, which was accomplished.¹¹ In later years he aided Benjamin Pickman in gathering material to be used in a book titled *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*, Vol. XVI, 1764-1767.²

The church at Dunstable had been unable to settle on a minister for a score of years. A brighter day dawned upon the church, although the cloud rolled but slowly and heavily away. The silver lining appeared in Mr. Joseph Kidder, a late graduate of Yale College. He was wise as well as able and pious, and he would keep the peace for a generation. He was offered a settlement of \$450 and an annual salary of thirteen pounds, six shillings [about \$180].^{5 8} The town of Dunstable voted their ministers a “settlement” for nearly a hundred and fifty years. In these early times a town settled a minister for life, taking him “for better, for worse”; and the settlement was the marriage dowry. The settlement varied as the circumstances of the town changed. For instance, the town once offered Mr. Weld, for encouragement, six hundred acres

of land, called “the ministerial lot,” to settle. Such a settlement could be modified thereafter only by a new agreement between the parties.



Reverend Joseph Kidder's Yale diploma, 1764.

Apparently some members of other religious beliefs were reluctant to pay any tax for the support of Rev. Kidder, which is revealed in this entry from the town records, dated October 6, 1767: “Voted to excuse persons of other persuasions from paying tax to support Rev. Mr. Kidder,” and at the same meeting, “Voted not to give leave to remove any of the windows of the meeting house ,and not to excuse any person of different persuasion from paying to support the minister,” then reconsidered, and “Voted to excuse those who brought a certificate from the minister that they were of a different persuasion.”

The town records reveal Rev. Kidder’s salary in an entry for March 5, 1781: “Voted three hundred and twenty-eight pounds, nine shillings, new issue or equivalent, to procure beef for the army,” also “voted to pay Rev. Mr. Kidder’s salary, upon the scale of depreciation, as

ordered by the court, the amount being sixty-six pounds, thirteen shillings, and for pence in bills of the new issue.”⁸

“Scarcely had the internal dissensions settled down to comparative quiet under the wise counsels of Rev. Kidder, when the town was excited by premonitions of trouble with the Mother-Country. The spirit of opposition, aroused by the Stamp Act and the tea-tax, together with the evident purpose of the British government to place the churches of America under the control of the Church of England, culminated at last at Lexington and Bunker Hill. Town meetings were held in the church. The green in front of the meeting-house near Gibson’s tavern was covered with excited Federalists discussing the events of the day and preparing for the contest. The people called upon the minister to search the Scriptures and declare to them the counsels of God; and we may be sure that Joseph Kidder responded with alacrity. Dr. Bouton of Concord related an incident illustrating the patriotic spirit of the New Hampshire clergy during the Revolution. ‘One Sunday Col. Gordon Hutchins rode into Concord from Exeter, and, dismounting at the door of the church, entered in the midst of the service. The quick eye of Timothy Walker, the venerable pastor, caught sight of him; and, suddenly pausing, he called out, ‘Col. Hutchins, are you the bearer of any message?’ ‘Yes! Gen. Burgoyne is on his march to Albany: Gen. Stark has offered to take command of New Hampshire men; and if all turn out, we can cut off his march.’ The old pastor instantly rejoined: ‘Those of you who are willing to go had better go at once.’ All the men in the meeting-house rose and went out. Many enlisted. The whole night was spent in preparation, and a company was ready to march the next day.

Beyond doubt, Capt. William Walker and the Dunstable company – which comprised one-half the able-bodied men of the town – accoutered for battle, marched to church before going to Charlestown, and listened to a patriotic farewell sermon from Joseph Kidder, and were fortified in spirit by his strong and fervent prayers for the success and prosperity of the American armies. The psalm would be one of David’s war songs: the text, brave Joab’s words, ‘Be of good courage, play the men for our people, and for the cities of our God; and the Lord do that which seemeth him good’: the sermon, adapted to the occasion and full of the spirit of the day. The pastor’s stammering tongue would be loosened in the freedom and energy of his utterance as he touched their finer feelings or roused them to the dreadful onset. Men, women and children would be melted at his pathos, and animated by his martial spirit as

He spoke of wrongs too long endured,

Of sacred rights to be secured;

Then from his patriot tongue of flame

The startling words for Freedom came;

The stirring sentences he spake,
Compelled the heart to glow or quake;
And, rising on his theme's broad wing,
And grasping in his nervous hand,
The imaginary battle brand,
In face of death he dared to fling
Defiance to a tyrant king.

It fills us with patriotic pride to know that *our* minister was one of the sources of moral inspiration at that day.

The records of the Hollis Association, traced by Mr. Kidder's own hand [he was secretary from 1772-1803], show how vital was the interest among the associated clergymen in this region. The war was the all-absorbing topic. Ordinary discussions on disputed points were laid aside for graver matters of immediate public duty and interest. One of their number, Samuel Webster of Temple, was already in the army as Chaplain; and afterwards laid his life down in the service. It requires no stirring of the imagination to see these patriotic and godly ministers engaged in earnest counsel, and uniting in fervent prayer on bended knees, supplicating the Divine blessing and guidance."⁴

After the Revolution Reverend Kidder's church was troubled by Baptists, but according to a neighbor he "acted wisely and like a Hero" in dealing with them.^{2, 10}

"Mr. Kidder was a fine representative of a gentleman of the old school. Many of our citizens remember the slight figure of the aged minister, always clothed in taste, and scrupulously neat and clean. His dress and manners were the visible expression of his generous nature expressed itself in manners courteously polite. His pre-eminently scriptural sermons were prepared with great care, but suffered in their delivery by an impediment in his speech. His house [later owned by Cyrus L. Scott] was half way between Amherst and Chelmsford, and was ever open with free-hearted hospitality to his friends in those places as they journeyed to and fro. It is not difficult to imagine this genial country-parson of the olden time, seated with his friends before the large open fireplace – filled with a sparkle-shooting hemlock fire roaring up the deep-throated chimney, and detailing from his retentive memory interesting anecdotes, both grave and gay, lively and severe, in utterance which receives its choicest flavor from its hesitating accents. The picture instinctively recalls the genial gentleness of Charles Lamb in the midst of his chosen companions.

For many years he was the exact and punctual scribe of the Hollis Association of ministers. Whenever he was called upon for a sermon, the stuttering secretary recorded the fact in this modest way, 'The scribe *attempted* to preach.' Throughout his long life he was a constant and most intelligent student of the Bible. His marvelous memory was an encyclopedia of scriptural facts, genealogies, and anecdote. In his last days – when his memory was failing – though forgetting everything else, he could quote the Scriptures with all the appropriateness and accuracy of his early manhood. He was keenly alive to the importance of the routine of religious observances as an aid to the growth and vigor of spiritual life. He deeply realized the importance of what are called the 'little things' of life. A few small defects of character, suffered to go uncorrected, he expected to see developed, in time, into down-right sins of omission. So careful was he to observe the golden rule and the rights of property that he would not allow himself to take a berry from a field or an apple from the wayside, without obtaining permission from the proprietor.

The clergyman was treated with universal respect, particularly by the young. It was a wonderful sight to the rising generation in those days to see parson Kidder on his daily horseback ride. As he passed the schoolhouse the children arranged themselves in line, with uncovered heads, and made their manners to the good man, who, in turn, lifted his cocked hat and, with a pleasant smile, bade them a 'cheerful good morning.' When minister or stranger entered the schoolroom or the family apartment, the children arose at once to their feet." ⁴

Dunstable Nov^r 28th 1806
(49)

Sir,

In answer to the Letter I had the honor to receive from you last Sept^r I would inform you that the Mess. M^r Rind, late minister of Lyndeborough, ^{died on the 12th of Oct (N. H.)} (the place of his stated residence the latter part of his life) October 12th 1806. in the 82nd year of his age.

I should have answered sooner if it had been in my power; as it was not I hope you will excuse the delay of your humble servant

Joseph Kidder

Benjamin Pickman Esq^r

Letter from Rev. Joseph Kidder to Benjamin Pickman, Esquire dated November 28, 1806.

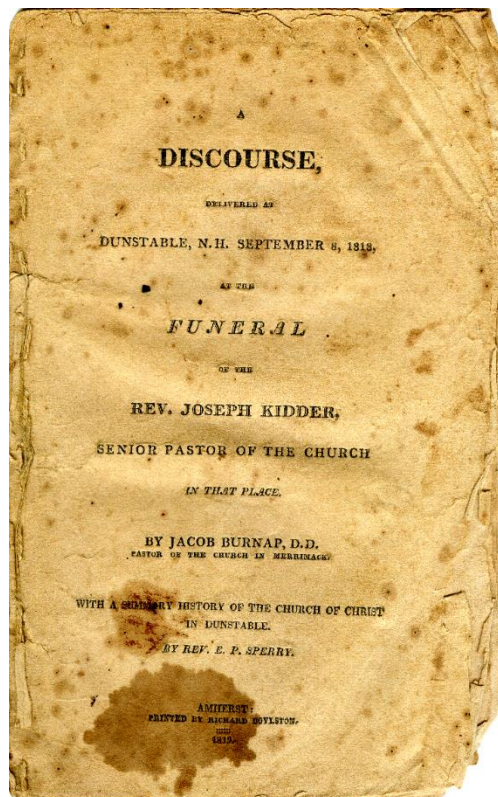
Rev. Kidder's long pastorate of over fifty-one years was not without trials. Party spirit, although slumbering, was occasionally roused into energetic life, both on old points of dispute, and on new ones occasioned by the exigencies of the times. The difficulties culminated in

1796. The case was referred to a committee mutually chosen by the parties, which decided to end the civil connection between Rev. Kidder and the town. The committee – as it appears – arranged to have Mr. Kidder remain with the church, at least as its *nominal* pastor, so long as he was able in some measure to satisfactorily perform his ministerial duties.⁴ Probably the committee continued to serve as a permanent arbiter in the case. He was dismissed “for inability” on June 15, 1796, and was consequently the last minister paid and settled by the town; and here ended the Dunstable theocracy. He subsequently sued his parish for his back pay, but continued to preach and exercise his pastoral function.^{2, 4, 5}

Even after the church at Dunstable became an independent organization, it still continued the services of the faithful pastor, Joseph Kidder, for more than thirty years longer.

When the town decided to erect a new dwelling-house in 1811 [to be completed one year from September], and in a meeting on May 11, 1811, they voted “to appropriate one hundred dollars to hire Rev. Joseph Kidder to preach such length of time as he thought proper for that amount.”⁸

Because of failing health, a “colleague,” Rev. Mr. Sperry, was ordained on November 3, 1813. This fact is known per page 8 of the old Record Book of the Church. Rev. Sperry continued until he was dismissed in 1819, about a year after Rev. Kidder’s death, and then went to assume the chaplaincy of the South Boston House of Correction.^{4, 5}



Discourse delivered by Rev. Humphrey Moore at the funeral of Rev. Joseph Kidder, with a history of the church by Rev. Ebenezer P. Sperry. Published in 1819.

Many of Rev. Sperry’s reminiscences of Rev. Joseph Kidder were recorded and referenced in future history books:

“ . . . to show the importance of an early acquaintance with the Scriptures, Mr. Kidder while enjoying health was favored with a remarkably retentive memory. He had stored his mind with a vast variety of anecdotes, interesting stories and genealogies of families, and was accurate and particular and even to a fault minute in the relation of them. Many hours and I do not know but I might say days, have I spent in listening to them. But when his memory

failed him by reason of sickness and old age all these escaped his recollection. I believe an anecdote one minute long he could not relate for nearly a year before his death. But the Scriptures appeared as familiar to him as ever, and he was as appropriate in the use of Scripture language as at any former period, which he clearly manifested in his daily family prayers. He had long accustomed himself to consider that a few small defects indulged amounted to a manifest fault. His faults – for it is not pretended that he had none – appear to arise from his scrupulous care to guard against them. He has told me that he would not take a berry from another man's field, nor an apple from a tree that grew by the way side without liberty, for it was his neighbor's property. So careful was he to do by his neighbors as he would be done by.

In his family he allowed no business to encroach upon devotion. It became as habitual with him to pray morning and evening as to eat or sleep. In his last sickness he lost the days of the week and even the Sabbaths. He lost the recollection of his children and nearest neighbors, but his religious habits were not in the least impaired.

I called upon him one morning and not knowing that I should find him alive went early. He was sitting in his easy chair, his Bible in his hand, his specks upon his face and was asleep. I enquired if he could read. I was informed that the Bible was almost the first thing he asked for. He took it and read, but finding it bottom side up he turned it and read as before. 'Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ.' In this way he read till he fell asleep. After he awoke he had no knowledge of me, nor of several members of the family who were present. He then attempted to perform the long accustomed duties of devotion. After several efforts of his own he was raised by two persons supporting him under each arm and having kneeled in his chair he prayed thus: 'God of the morning and God of the morning,' repeating that expression several times, for his memory was gone. Again he said, 'tis of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, that we are not consumed.' He attended devotions stately in his family. Prayer was the last exercise he was capable of performing. At the very moment that he was praying for his family and for himself, for me and this church he endured that shock which palsied all his limbs and rendered him forever speechless to mortal ears.

The 'specks' to which Mr. Sperry refers, as belonging to Mr. Kidder are now in possession of the Nashua Historical Society, having been donated by Widow Sophia Nutt of Dunstable (now Nashua). A side board also belonging to him, imported from England and a part of the marriage dowry of his wife, was later owned by Edward H. Spalding, Esq., of Dunstable (now Nashua). It was originally an elegant article of furniture and as tradition says was the repository of the parson's liquors."³

Rev. Joseph Kidder died of a “paralytic stroke” on September 6, 1818. In his highly complementary obituary he is described as the senior pastor of the Dunstable church. The strength of his religious habits appeared in bold relief during the closing days of life. His memory failed to retain the names and faces of his children and neighbors; but his Bible, his prayers, and his Saviour were never forgotten. Prayer was his last audible utterance. He was asking Heaven’s blessing on his family, his colleague and his church, when the fatal stroke of palsy stilled his feeble stammering tongue forever to mortal ears. His funeral discourse was delivered by Rev. Humphrey Moore of Milford, New Hampshire and subsequently published by Rev. Jacob Burnap, of Merrimack, New Hampshire in 1819. His household had been a very comfortable one, but his widow was in need before her death in March 1835 at age 97, having received aid for 16 years prior from the Widow’s Charitable fund of New Hampshire, amounting to three hundred and thirty-eight dollars.^{1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8}



Rev. Joseph Kidder’s 6th great-grandson, Clark Owen Kidder, poses next to Rev. Kidder’s grave on September 26, 2016. Photo by Chad Dudzek.

Rev. Joseph Kidder was buried in the Old South Cemetery, now known as Evergreen Cemetery, which was established just north of the Old South church that he preached at. His slate stone bears the inscriptions of himself, his wife, Mary (1738-1836), his daughter, Ruth Kidder (1779-1819), and his son, Joseph Kidder, Jr. (1769-1811). Joseph Kidder, Junior is the oldest burial in this cemetery.⁸

The headstone bears the name its’ carver at the very bottom – “B. [Benjamin] Day, Lowell [Massachusetts]. Benjamin Day (1783-1855) moved to Lowell sometime between 1824 and 1830 from Salem,

Bottom of Rev. Kidder’s headstone showing the name and address of the carver, Benjamin Day of Lowell, Massachusetts.



Massachusetts where he had set up shop on Winter Street as early as 1807, and advertised the shop for sale in 1824. By 1829 he was carving gravestones in Little’s Station Cemetery in South

Nashua, New Hampshire, and in 1832 he is listed in the *Lowell Street Directory* as a stone cutter "at Lowell Street, boarding at Whipples."¹²

Sources:

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5. Fox, Charles J. *History of the Old Township of Dunstable, including Nashua, Nashville, Hollis Hudson, Litchfield, and Merrimack, New Hampshire*. Nashua: Charles T. Gill Publishers, 1846. Pages 15, 197-8.
6. Burnap, Jacob, D. D., Pastor of the church in Merrimack. Discourse delivered at Dunstable, N.H. September 8, 1818, at the Funeral of Rev. Joseph Kidder, Senior Pastor of the Church in that place – with a summary history of the church of Christ in Dunstable, By Rev. E. P. Sperry; Amherst: Printed by Richard Boylston, 1819. Consists of 24 pages. Originals are in the Clark Owen Kidder collection and The Lilly Library, Indiana University (University call number AC2 B965 D5).
7. Dexter, Franklin Bowditch. *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College with Annals of the College History, Vol. III, May, 1763-July, 1778*; Henry Holt and Co., New York, 1903; pgs. 72-3.
8. Parker, Judge Edward E. *A History of the City of Nashua, New Hampshire from the Earliest Settlement of Old Dunstable to the year 1895 with Biographical Sketches of Early Settlers, Their Descendants and Other Residents*; Telegraph Publishing Co., Nashua, N. H., 1897. Pgs. 51, 52, 58, 150, 185, 575-6, 578, 581. Burials in the Evergreen Cemetery, page 188: "The above inscriptions are all on one and the same headstone in Lot 44, Plots 7701-4 . . . minister in Nashua, having been settled in 1767. Within this square Lies the remains of Rev. Joseph Kidder. Obt. Sep. 1818 AEt. 77; Mrs. Mary Kidder. Obt. March,

1836. AEt. 97; Mr. Joseph Kidder, Jr. Obt. Nov. 1811. AEt. 42; Miss Ruth Kidder. Obt. June, 1819. AEt 40.”

9. Bridge, Ebenezer. Diary of; 1716-1792; Collection of Houghton Library; MS Am 1186-1186.2; Harvard University; II, 689. Entry in diary is from March 18, 1767.
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12. Day, Marilyn. Benjamin Day, Stone Carver, Lowell, Mass. (1783-1855); Westford, MA, 2005; pgs. 8, 10. Available online as an electronic file.